

## OVERVIEW

# Differential Response in California

## Background

California's child welfare system is undergoing a series of related reforms to improve outcomes for children and families. Efforts over the last several years have resulted in increased consensus and direction for how best to improve services to children and families where abuse or neglect may be present. County innovation, stakeholder involvement and foundation funded initiatives have all informed statewide efforts, resulting in increased, positive collaboration to improve child safety.

Among the most promising of the changes underway is an innovative change in how child welfare agencies, and indeed whole communities, respond to reports of child abuse and neglect – more than 500,000 reports each year in California. Known formally in the child welfare community as Differential Response, this bold approach enables county child welfare agencies to respond in significantly broader and different ways to reports of child abuse and neglect. Currently, 11 California counties receive modest funding to pilot this critical change in practice and along with 32 other counties are benefiting from technical assistance to support early implementation efforts.

Differential Response is one of three key statewide efforts underway to improve California's child welfare system. It works hand-in-hand with two other primary efforts: an improved approach to assessing a child's safety once a report has been filed, and expanded efforts to ensure that all children have permanent, loving homes and relationships in their lives. Together, these efforts share fundamental strategies that guide their collective improvement of child welfare outcomes in California:

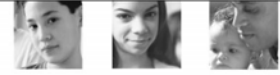
- **Seeing Families as Part of the Solution.** By engaging families in identifying solutions to their problems, child welfare agencies promote voluntary participation in community services and support. This is a shift away from the adversarial way in which child welfare agencies traditionally have interacted with families and is particularly important for families where there are problems but not sufficient risk to the child to warrant court-ordered intervention.
- **Community Partnerships.** Acknowledging that government can't do it alone, child welfare agencies are expanding partnerships with government agencies and community organizations that offer vital services to support families. This means that in communities across California there will be more organizations offering a coordinated set of resources to support children and families in need.

## What is Differential Response?

Differential Response is an approach to ensuring child safety by expanding the ability of child welfare agencies to respond to reports of child abuse and neglect. Its focus includes a **broader set of responses for working with families at the first signs of trouble**, including innovative partnerships with community based organizations that can help support families that are in need – and before further problems develop. With Differential Response, social workers work with families to engage them in solutions and to provide focused services so that there is the best possible opportunity to make needed improvements.

What Differential Response means for California is that more children and families will get the support they need to help keep children safely in their homes.





## Principles

At the heart of Differential Response are key principles that guide its practice and application:

- Children are safer and families are stronger when communities work together.
- Identifying family issues and stepping in early leads to better results than waiting until a family is in real crisis.
- Families can more successfully resolve issues when they voluntarily engage in solutions, services and supports.

## Responding Differently to Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect

Differential Response is an evolution of child welfare practice that has been adopted successfully by more than a dozen other states and represents a growing movement to provide services to children and families at the earliest signs of trouble. While adapted by each state to meet its own needs, California's approach centers on providing a broader set of responses to reports of child abuse and neglect by child welfare and community agencies.

By providing earlier and more meaningful responses to emerging signs of family problems, child welfare agencies can mobilize resources to help families before troubles escalate. This is a real change from the traditional child welfare system of providing a "one size fits all" response to child abuse reports where the overwhelming majority of hotline reports receive a risk assessment but no further services because they do not meet government criteria for intervention and response. In 2003, for example, an analysis by the Child Welfare Services Stakeholders Group revealed that 92 percent of hotline calls did not result in any substantive services being provided to families despite clear indications that these families were in need of help.

Differential Response offers multiple paths for ensuring child safety – all of which include engaging families whenever possible to help identify solutions to the challenges that they may be facing and that are posing risks to a child's safety and wellbeing.

- **Path #1: Community Response.** This path is chosen when allegations do not meet statutory definitions of abuse or neglect, yet there are indications that a family is experiencing problems that could be addressed by community services. Under California's traditional child welfare system, more than one-third of all cases are re-referrals from the previous year, indicating that there are continued challenges facing these families and their children. With Differential Response, these families are linked to services in the community through expanded partnerships with local organizations.
- **Path #2: Child Welfare Services and Community Response.** This path is chosen when reports meet statutory definitions of abuse and neglect, and assessments indicate that with targeted services a family is likely to make needed improvements to improve child safety. Assessments determine a child's risk is low to moderate. In this situation, families work with representatives of county child welfare agencies, other county agencies and community based organizations to identify their risks and strengths and to participate in services for improving child and family well-being. The focus of this path is on a family's willingness to make needed improvements. If a family situation deteriorates and a child's safety is in danger, child welfare officials intervene as needed.
- **Path #3: Child Welfare Services Response.** This path is most similar to the child welfare system's traditional response and, like Path #2, is chosen when reports meet statutory definitions of abuse and neglect. This is the path chosen when children are not safe and includes situations where the risk is moderate to high for continued abuse or neglect. Actions may be taken with or without the family's consent, court orders may be involved and criminal charges may be filed. With Differential Response, social workers seek to engage families more fully and work with other county agencies to provide focused services so that there is the best possible opportunity to make needed improvements.